



Curse Those Filthy-Wicked Magi *The Broken Heart of Postmodern Ministry*

"JESUS CHRIST RETURNS TO EARTH."

You pause for a moment and reflect on the headline on lower left corner of page C6 of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*:

ST. LOUIS, MO: Reaction to Christ's return was mixed early this morning as citizens considered what ramifications last night's development might have for their lives. Federal officials have expressed concern over the constitutionality of Messianic returns, adding that the votes simply are not present to amend the Constitution. "Monarchy is simply not an option here," one official confided on condition of anonymity. Meanwhile the Pentagon announced U.S. forces have been placed on maximum alert, while reports have been leaked that special forces operatives have been dispatched with instructions to detain or execute Christ, believed to be a middle eastern male, about 30, with shiny face. Authorities suspect Jesus of masterminding a plot to establish a one-world government under totalitarian rule.

Meanwhile, reaction in local churches was mixed. "We don't believe in second comings," explained one Episcopal minister. Conservative evangelical Christians were more welcoming of the news, however. When asked whether they had witnessed Christ's return, one woman answered, "No. I heard it was happening last night, but couldn't make it. Wednesday night is Bible study night, and we've been studying the book of Revelation. I'd hate to miss it." One local Presbyterian church has announced it will establish a committee to examine predictions of Christ's return. "We hope to set up a program to deal with that," explained the pastor. "We try to have a program for everyone."

The local director of Planned Parenthood, Missouri's leading provider of abortions, also reacted to news of Christ's return in a press release Thursday morning. "Due to the coming of our God and Savior Jesus Christ, we have closed our facilities permanently." The director did not respond to a phone call from

the *Post-Dispatch*. Witnesses, however, report seeing her with Jesus this morning. An unnamed source also reports seeing Missouri gay rights activists as well as a local voodoo practitioner worshipping Jesus.

The Magi weren't Kings

The opening chapters of Matthew's gospel would have read something like this to the first century Jewish Christians for which he wrote. (No, Jesus didn't really return this week. You'd know if he had, since you'd have a glorified body and no more sinful nature. Sorry.) I know we sing about three kings of old, but the Bible doesn't speak of three people, but of three gifts. Chances are there was a sizable caravan, likely under guard to protect these respected men in their journey from the east. But there probably weren't three of them, and they definitely weren't kings. They were *magi*, plural of *magus*, like the arch-heretic Simon Magus in the book of Acts who sought to purchase the Holy Spirit to increase his personal power. We get the English term *magic* from *magus*. Magi were astrologers, diviners, practitioners of the occult, students of the stars. If they were from the east, they might have been Zoroastrian priests in the courts of the Parthian Empire. Everyone knew the truly great magi were from Babylon or Persia. Notice the picture of a Persian magus reading the stars before his king, above.

I'll cut to the chase. These men were pagans. Sinners. Any good Jew would have been repulsed like a Taliban seeing a male prostitute with a vodka martini in his hand. For deeply religious Jews like the scribes (or like the Jewish Christians who first read Matthew's gospel), the thought of a magus honoring Christ would have been troubling. First century Israel was in the middle of a culture war. Pagan Roman and Greek influences had corrupted Jewish culture. Consider the synagogue in what would become Jesus' hometown. Archaeologists have dug it up, and it's there. But it's small, and down the street was a brothel many times larger. God's law was dishonored in the land already. Filthy magi were unwelcome.

How could magi know of Christ? Remember how a much earlier Babylonian king had named the Hebrew prophet Daniel chief of the magi because he could interpret dreams (Daniel 4:9; 5:11). Indeed, the magi of the first century considered Daniel one of their founders. There continued to be a large Jewish population in Babylon, and Jews frequently held positions of authority within the court bureaucracies of the East. The book of Daniel in particular was respected as one of the great astrological texts, a text which spoke of a coming king of the Jews, "one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven [who] approached the Ancient of Days." In Daniel's vision, this messianic king "was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will not be destroyed" (Daniel 7:13-14.)

Though they practiced a forbidden art from a false religion (Deuteronomy 18:11), and though they had only an astronomical phenomenon and Daniel to go by, an entourage of magi showed up at the palace in Jerusalem, asking to see the new Jewish king. Where else would they look? A new king of the Jews would be in the capital, specifically in the palace. Given such an entourage from the east, Herod received the men.

Remember that Herod had strangled his own wife

The problem was that the old king hadn't died yet—though he was in the last year of his life. Herod the Great (ruled 37-4 BC) was the king of the Jews, and he wasn't aware of any replacement. Like any king, Herod took quite seriously astrological predictions of rising and falling kings. This was particularly so with Herod, since he had no real claim to the Jewish throne. Herod was an Edomite (not a Jew) by birth, so he did what other rulers did when they saw their offices threatened. Herod sought to kill the (assumed) usurper. Can we blame him? How much could he have known?

More than you might think. At the very least, Herod understood that this new king was the Christ (Messiah) promised in Scripture (Matthew 2:4). So Herod sought out those who would know where the Christ was to be born. Knowing the place, and knowing the time of the birth from the Magi, Herod sought to kill the new king. When the Magi didn't report back to him, he had all the possible candidates killed.

This fits with the picture we get of Herod elsewhere. According to writers at the time, Herod had strangled his own wife. He had killed three of his own sons when he had considered them a threat to his throne. Herod was known to be extremely cruel during his later years. Not long after the events in Matthew 2, he had all the wealthy and influential men in Jerusalem incarcerated together in the Jerusalem hippodrome. He gave his guards one command: at the moment of Herod's own death, butcher all the great men of Jerusalem. Herod was hated, and he dreaded the thought that others might rejoice in his death. He sought to make certain there would be mourning on the day of his death. None other than the emperor in Rome himself had remarked of Herod, "Better to be one of Herod's pigs than his son."

The Religious Scholars Had the Right Answer.

Herod sought out the scribes (and the chief priests). The scribes were those who were students of the Law. They, contra the Sadducean priests who rejected all but the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy), would more likely have been experts on the

prophetical books (such as Micah 5:2, where Herod's answer was found). The scribes were thus closely linked with the Pharisees, who (numbering about 6,000) were considered the most holy people of their day. They were the "real Christians," the spiritual people, the ones who obeyed God's law. They were our side in the culture war. Since the magi had announced the birth of the coming king, and since Herod had informed them it was the Christ, we see a problematic response. The scribes had the right answer—Christ is in Bethlehem, a day's walk from Jerusalem. The Magi had traveled many miles (possibly years) to worship the king of the Jews, and the Magi were Gentiles! The scribes don't show up in Bethlehem. They don't rush the child back to Jerusalem to insure his protection and training. It seems so bizarre. They were just too busy being scribes.

The Crowds, by contrast, were worried. We read here that Herod was troubled "and all Jerusalem with him" (Matthew 2:3). So we see four different responses to the revelation of God's grace in Christ. The ruling authority saw competition, and abused its authority to eliminate the threat, even if the threat was recognized as the promised Christ. The religious scholars had the right answers, but were ambivalent at best. They had an understanding of truth, but no desire to act on it. The common folk were just worried that Herod might make their lives difficult—the "middle classes" lived for personal peace and affluence then, just as they do today. God is incarnate and has come to save, and who sacrifices themselves to honor Jesus Christ? Filthy-wicked astrologers. The first century's equivalent of abortionists, homosexual activists, or voodoo papas. That's the message of God's grace to sinners at Christmas.

I'll speak frankly for a moment. I know we're in the midst of a culture war. I know that the media are unbelieving. I know our culture is encouraging sexual perversions that were merely tolerated a few years ago. I know that we're murdering millions in clinics across America. Wherever there is injustice and unbelief, our calling as the church is to show the mercy of God in Christ, which alone can establish his law as supreme in our hearts. The danger we face as Christians in a land that dishonors God (and should know better) is that we become like the scribes. Matthew is targeting us, conservative Christians in America, every bit as much as he was targeting Jewish Christians in the first century. He means for us to approach the text realizing we are the scribes, the faithful ones, the people of the Bible. By seeing how events unfold, however, we are meant to examine ourselves again and realize we have far more in common with the filthy sinner than with the religious authority. We are the abortionists, the gay rights activists, the voodoo practitioners.

We identify not with the righteous, but with sinners, whom Christ calls to repentance. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a revelation of grace to those who have dishonored God in blindness and unbelief. This is the heart of ministry in a postmodern age. I have seen people leave the gay lifestyle to follow Jesus. I have been there when a young Christian flushes his marijuana stash down the toilet for God. When God calls a man or a woman from a postmodern culture, they bring with them tons and tons of sexual sin, abortions, idolatries, greed, addictions, pride, a history of false worship... you name it. Postmodern sheep aren't clean. Too many Christians are willing to write off an entire generation because of its sins. God points us to the birth of his Son, and says, "Consider who worships my Son. It is not the righteous, but sinners that I call." May this same God and Savior grant us a spirit of brokenness as we celebrate the incarnation and prepare ourselves to love sinners as they, too, enter the sanctuary to worship the holy and merciful God among us.